



AUTHENTICITY IN DIGITAL MARKETING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF USER-GENERATED AND IN-HOUSE BRANDED CONTENT ON INSTAGRAM IN FOSTERING CONSUMER TRUST AND LOYALTY FOR LICIOUS IN BENGALURU

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ABSTRACT

In today's digitally empowered era, authenticity plays a pivotal role in establishing consumer trust and loyalty, particularly on social media platforms such as Instagram. This study investigates the comparative impact of in-house branded content and User-Generated Content (UGC) in fostering consumer trust and loyalty for Licious, a leading Bengaluru-based Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) meat retail brand. Leveraging Licious's strong online presence and active customer engagement, the research explores how perceptions of content authenticity influence consumer-brand relationships. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative data from structured questionnaires with qualitative insights from interviews conducted with Licious marketing professionals. Data was gathered from Licious consumers and Instagram users in Bengaluru to assess their perceptions of content authenticity, emotional resonance, and the resulting effects on brand trust and loyalty. Preliminary assumptions, based on existing literature, suggested that UGC—being peer-generated and relatable—would have a more significant influence on consumer trust and loyalty compared to company-created branded content. The findings support this, revealing that consumers are more inclined to trust and remain loyal to brands that showcase genuine user experiences over polished corporate messaging. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital consumer engagement and authenticity in marketing, offering practical insights for D2C brands aiming to strengthen consumer trust through strategic content marketing. This research adds to the literature on digital consumer engagement as well as authenticity in marketing, providing actionable findings for D2C brands intending to build consumer trust through strategic content marketing that resonates, involves and creates meaningful bonds with the consumers.

KEYWORDS: User-Generated Content, Branded Content, Authenticity, Consumer Trust, Brand Loyalty, Licious

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital platforms has transformed marketing communication. Authenticity in brand communication is critical to consumer decision-making in a D2C business model, as utilized by Licious. Existing literature indicates that UGC—peer-generated and emotion-based content is regarded as more authentic than content created by brands. This research is based on the increasing consumer distrust of glossy brand content and examines the influence of perceived authenticity through UGC and branded content on trust and loyalty. Within the Instagram-centric environment of Bengaluru, consumers actively engage with content that resonates with their identity and values. This research positions itself within Licious's Instagram advertising to evaluate which type of content incites more emotional connection and behavioural intention among its target market.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Yang et al. (2021) — Building Brand Authenticity on Social Media

Yang et al., in their paper "Building Brand Authenticity on Social Media," highlight that authenticity on Instagram is stimulated by the visual sincerity and affective resonance of content. It was discovered that audiences react more favorably towards unedited, naturalistic depictions in preference to staged brand imagery. Ad models who feel authentic are better at

establishing trust, and this, in turn, affects brand loyalty. This result resonates within Licious' context, where Instagram, as a visual platform, is central to influencing consumer insights. For D2C food companies, how content is framed, particularly if it seems real and reliable, may influence not just engagement but buying intention as well. The study also supports the premise that branded content should transcend promotional looks and create psychological proximity through authenticity signals.

Niu (2025) – The Impact of User-Generated Content on Consumer Trust and Brand Loyalty

Niu's research on "The Impact of User-Generated Content on Consumer Trust and Brand Loyalty" emphasizes peer-based content credibility. UGC, when volunteered by customers, also creates a co-creation and community sense. Consumers have a higher tendency to believe in actual experiences posted by fellow users rather than brand-created stories. Social proof has a major effect on emotional engagement and purchasing behavior. For Licious, UGC, like recipe images, reviews, and food preparation images acts as word-of-mouth in the digital space. The study also cautions against fake or heavily filtered UGC, promoting curated but natural user content. These observations are directly transferable to Instagram strategies, wherein brands depend upon developing long-term trust for sensitive categories such as food delivery and hygiene.

Ahmad et al. (2024) – Authenticity as a Strategic Weapon

Ahmad et al., in “Authenticity as a Strategic Weapon,” suggests that authenticity works on three levels: personal (affective connection), functional (trustworthy product information), and relational (interactive interaction). The research discovered that brands that co-create content with consumers and use two-way communication stimulate deeper emotional loyalty. This is especially important for Licious, where brand trust relies on transparency and perceived cleanliness. The study indicates that UGC supports affective equity, and branded content reinforces value messaging. By using both types strategically, brands can become credible while still retaining control of narratives. Ahmad et al. also suggests keeping feedback loops alive through content responses, hence generating a cycle of loyalty and trust through continued user engagement.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To examine consumer perceptions of authenticity in User-Generated Content (UGC) and in-house branded content shared by Licious on Instagram.
- To assess the role of perceived content authenticity in shaping consumer trust and brand loyalty towards Licious.
- To compare the impact of UGC and branded content on consumer engagement levels and purchase intentions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- What type of Instagram content (User-Generated or branded) is perceived as more authentic by Licious consumers in Bengaluru?
- In what ways does perceive authenticity influence consumer trust and loyalty towards the Licious brand?
- How does exposure to UGC versus branded content affect consumers' likelihood to engage with, recommend, or repurchase from Licious?

METHODOLOGY:

This research employed a mixed-methods strategy that entailed a guided online questionnaire with 164 respondents and two in-depth interviews with Licious's marketing team. The questionnaire was administered among Bengaluru-based Licious consumers who follow or have engaged with the brand's Instagram stories. A mix of convenience and purposive sampling techniques was employed. Quantitative data were treated through percentage analysis, whereas qualitative responses were assessed through thematic analysis. Ethical clearance was granted, and informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

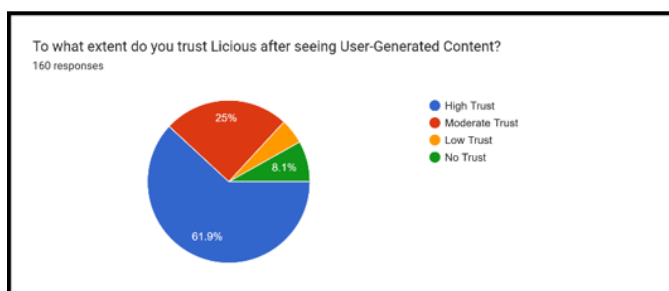


Fig. 1. Impact on Consumer Trust through User-Generated Content

This chart Fig.1. shows that over 80% of respondents develop moderate to very high trust in Licious after viewing UGC such as customer reviews, home-cooked meals, and testimonials.

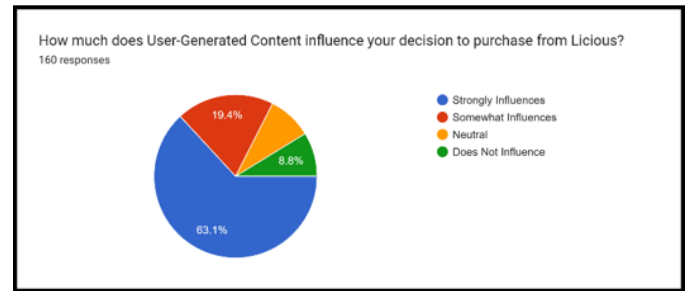


Fig 2: Impact on Purchase Intent through User-Generated Content

The second chart Fig.2. reveals that more than 82% of consumers reported being influenced (either highly or somewhat) by UGC in their decision to purchase from Licious.

NOTES:

- Most consumers trust Licious more after seeing content shared by other users rather than polished branded content.
- UGC significantly impacts consumer purchase intent, validating its role as an effective persuasion tool in a trust-sensitive category like meat retail.

Theme No.	Theme	Key Insight Summary
1	Content Strategy & Planning	Balanced mix for brand tone
2	UGC Encouragement Strategies	Promotes user posts and stories
3	UGC's Impact on Trust & Purchase	Boosts trust and buying intent
4	Challenges to Authenticity	Brand control reduces realness
5	Community Feedback & Strategy	Comments shape future content

Table 1

NOTES:

- Themes were extracted from two interviews with Licious marketing experts based on thematic analysis.
- UGC emerged as a top driver of trust and purchasing intent.
- Community input and brand consistency guide content planning.

INTERPRETATION:

Survey findings unequivocally suggest that UGC exerts significant leverage over consumer trust and buying behaviour. More than 80% of the participants indicated forming moderate to very strong trust in Licious upon watching UGC, and an equivalent percentage reported UGC having a strong impact on their purchasing intent. Thematic analysis of interviews supported these observations. Marketing professionals at Licious pointed out that although the brand has tactical control over tone and imagery, it encourages UGC actively since it speaks to audiences more authentically. They agreed that

authenticity is most pronounced in unfiltered, peer-generated content, although internal branding objectives sometimes limit how far they can venture. Community feedback, particularly comments, came out as a critical input for content iteration, revealing that two-way engagement solidifies trust. Concurrently, pain points such as coping with authenticity in brand boundaries and selective influencer participation were recognized as being in a constant need for balancing.

Combined, both data sets reveal that though Licious enjoys refined branded content, it is UGC that wins emotional credibility and consumer action.

FINDINGS:

- The majority of customers find UGC more real and tangible compared to branded content.
- More than 80% of the respondents said they felt more trust in Licious upon watching UGC.
- Purchase decisions were heavily impacted by UGC, with more than 82% saying high or moderate impact.
- Branded content was perceived as visually similar but emotionally less appealing.
- Interview findings established that UGC creates more solid emotional and cultural bonds.
- Feedback from the community, particularly in the form of comments, is critical in determining content strategy.

DISCUSSION:

The research supports the increasing role of authenticity in influencing online consumer behavior, particularly in industries where trust is a key driver of purchases. User-Generated Content (UGC) was found in survey responses to significantly influence both trust and purchasing behavior, reinforcing existing findings that peer-generated content is deemed more trustworthy than brand-generated messages. The affective connection of UGC—especially based on cultural familiarity and food memory—resonates stronger and is more engaging than proprietary branded content.

The interviews gave greater insight into the way Licious achieves a balance between brand voice and authenticity of user-generated content. Branded content may provide consistency and visual identity, but it tends to be missing emotional immediacy, which is the hallmark of UGC. Marketing professionals recognized that community interaction (e.g., reactions and comments) is not only a measure but a strategic guide for content planning. Overall, the results imply that UGC is not complementary but a core part of digital content strategy in markets sensitive to trust. With customers increasingly looking for realness rather than perfection, incorporating user voices in brand stories can be a long-term competitive edge.

LIMITATIONS:

First, the research population was geographically limited to Bengaluru's Instagram users who follow or engage with Licious. Therefore, the results might not be applicable to other parts of India or to viewers on other social media platforms.

Second, the qualitative analysis drew on just two expert

interviews. The findings were rich and closely consistent with the survey data, but more breadth of view from other roles across Licious or other D2C brands would have provided greater depth. The study was also conducted in a short time frame, limiting its capacity to capture changes in consumer perception or long-term behavioral effects.

Finally, the sole emphasis on Instagram, though pertinent due to the site's centrality to Licious, restricts the study's purview. Customers engage with content on different touchpoints, and future research may investigate how UGC influences trust and loyalty on YouTube, WhatsApp, or even offline.

CONCLUSION:

The results of this research validate that perceived authenticity of digital content, specifically UGC, is highly instrumental in forming consumer trust as well as shaping purchase behavior in D2C food. In the context of Licious, Instagram users considered UGC to be significantly more trustworthy, emotionally compelling, and convincing than branded content. This attests to the significance of authentic, community-sourced content in consumer decision-making. In addition, qualitative findings uncovered that although brand-driven content assists in upkeep of identity and form, it is the raw, emotional, and culture-based content by users that generates higher engagement. As consumer expectations shift in the digital era, brands that enable genuine conversations and visibly engage their communities in the process of storytelling will most likely maintain greater trust and loyalty. The study thus adds to an ever-increasing pool of knowledge that puts authenticity at the forefront of effective digital marketing strategy.

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